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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000438

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DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MP MURR SUPPORTS BERRI'S NATIONAL  
DIALOGUE PROPOSAL

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) MP Michel Murr outlined to the Charge on March 27 his support for a renewal of the National Dialogue, which Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri intends to revive should the March 29-30 Arab League summit fail to resolve Lebanon's presidential crisis. Murr was dismissive of March 14 MPs' rejection of Berri's proposal, since he does not believe they are the decision-makers. Murr warned the Charge that there could be a spike in assassinations in Lebanon in the wake of the Damascus summit.

¶2. (C) Murr recounted his recent statements putting some distance between him and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's bloc, to which Murr nominally belongs, saying that the people in his Metn district are saying Aoun no longer represents Christian interests. While reiterating his support for electing Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as president, Murr said he does not have much hope in breaking the current impasse. Murr also commented on the prospects of a war between Israel and Hizballah, alleging that Israel has been preparing itself militarily. End summary.

¶3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff and Senior Political LES Advisor paid an introductory call on MP Michel Murr, father of Defense Minister Elias Murr, at his residence on March 27. Murr's Metn bloc is allied with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's Change and Reform parliamentary bloc.

SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

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¶4. (C) Noting that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri is a close friend of his, Murr defended Berri's stance that as Speaker, Berri cannot open Parliament because the current government "is not legitimate." First a legal government must be formed, according to Berri, and can open Parliament. He expressed his support for Berri's March 23 speech calling for a renewal of the National Dialogue if the Arab League summit fails to resolve Lebanon's presidential crisis, but said he was unsure if majority leader Saad Hariri of March 14 supported the idea. He speculated that Saudi Arabia may advise Saad not to participate in the National Dialogue, particularly if war breaks out between Hizballah and Israel. (Comment: Murr repeatedly referred to Hizballah as a terrorist organization. LES Political Advisor noted that

this was the first time in their 15-year acquaintance that he has referred to the group as such. End comment.)

15. (C) When pressed by the Charge about whether a national dialogue should not rightly take place in a functioning parliamentary setting, Murr responded that Parliament is essentially dominated by five main players, and therefore the dialogue may as well include only these main leaders. He added that Berri had asked for Murr's and MP Ghassan Tueini's (March 14) participation in the dialogue, and both accepted.

#### ANTICIPATING SYRIA'S REACTION TO THE SUMMIT

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16. (C) Murr said he is anticipating a negative reaction by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to the Egyptian, Saudi, and Lebanese "boycotts" of the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus. He noted that Lebanon's absence from the summit is very significant. Syria's negative reaction, he suggested, could mean a spike in politically-motivated assassinations in Lebanon. Conversely, Murr posited that Syria could choose instead to respond positively, and use its Arab League chairmanship to facilitate Arab reconciliation.

#### FREEING HIMSELF FROM AOUN

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17. (C) Indicating his growing distance from Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and apparent signals of interest in moving to March 14, Murr said he used to be a friend of Syria. He said he now no longer has contact with the Assad regime, which instead communicates with Aoun. Referring to a televised announcement he made in the previous two weeks declaring his break from Aoun's Change and Reform parliamentary bloc, Murr noted that he had started his

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political life as an independent and he is ready to reclaim his independence from Aoun.

18. (C) Murr explained that approximately 1,000 community leaders from his district in Metn have been pressing him to separate from Aoun because they blame Aoun for the presidential vacuum. The people in Metn are saying that Aoun, a Christian, is not a Christian leader, but a representative of Hizballah and Syria facilitating the return of Syria by blocking the presidential election. Murr predicted that Aoun is losing so much support that he will not retain his parliamentary seat in the 2009 elections. Although he declared himself as "now with March 14," Murr criticized March 14's aggressive rhetoric, singling out March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid who "should keep his mouth shut."

STILL SUPPORTING SLEIMAN,  
BUT WITHOUT MUCH HOPE

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19. (C) Murr reiterated his support for Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman's presidential candidacy, adding that he and Berri could bring the total to 91 deputies who would vote for Sleiman, if agreement was made on a ten-ten-ten cabinet split. Murr said he had been convincing Saad to support this breakdown, assuring Saad that Sleiman's ten deputies would vote alongside March 14. Nevertheless, Murr said he does not hold out hope that the blockage will be broken in the near future.

#### THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM?

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110. (C) Murr confided that he had heard that Israel is "secretly preparing itself militarily," adding that 400,000 reserves are to report to duty between April 10 and May 10. Murr acknowledged that the reserve duty is an annual, normal procedure for Israel, but pointed out that he believes

Hizballah is afraid. He suggested that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's March 24 speech was meant to placate its supporters.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Murr is the craftiest of politicians and long maintained his independence from Aoun within Aoun's bloc. We will not count him as having moved into the March 14 camp until it happens formally. We assess that Murr's recent moves away from Aoun is in part a response to his Metn constituency. An aging Murr is also motivated by his desire to see his son, Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Elias Murr, appointed as Minister of Interior in the new cabinet, something to which Aoun objects because he wants to reserve the position for his allies. Holding the Interior Minister post, which wields enormous influence, oversees Lebanon's Internal Security Forces and Surete Generale would secure Elias' political future for the next decade. The Ministry also controls preparations for the 2009 parliamentary elections and 2010 municipal elections. End comment.

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